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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a group work model for social workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, nurses, and teachers, to use with children who are experiencing the separation or divorce of their parents. The model is the basis of a 1-day treaining and consultation workshop for the Children of Divorce program offered by the Family Life Enrichment program of the Training and Consultation Institute, Hartford, Connecticut. Background information on the program is provided along with a brief description focusing on the program's philosophy and setting. The theoretical model for the program is presented with suggestions for starting a group within the school setting; these include recruitment, screening, and scheduling considerations. The content of the group sessions is briefly described with examples of possible presentation techniques. Adaptations of the model for use with different age levels are also presented. (KGB)

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SUPPORT GROUP FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

A Family Life Enrichment Group Model

by

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Title: SUPPORT GROUP FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Abstract: Providing services for children who have experienced parents' marital rupture has been identified as a growing need. This paper will describe a structured, time-limited group designed to provide support and information to children of divorce in the school environment and the training of school personnel to offer this group.

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SUPPORT GROUP SERVICES FOR

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

The high incidence of divorce has a serious impact on adults and children. It is estimated that more than 45% of today's children under 18 will spend some of their lives in a single-parent family, due primarily to divorce. Approximately half of the children experiencing divorce have school problems resulting from home problems. While the remainder do not exhibit long-term adjustment problems affecting school performance, they generally experience the same painful feelings of anger, confusion, betrayal and isolation as their counterparts. Few services have been available to all of these children to help them deal with the trauma relating to their parents' divorce.

Parents participating in educational and support groups on separation/ divorce and parenting children of divorce at a family service agency recognized the lack of similar support services for their children and requested a group be offered them. School personnel also indicated a growing need for help with this segment of their student population.

In response to this need, a structured, short-term group has been designed to enable children whose parents are in the process of divorce, or already divorced, to meet other children in similar circumstances, to recognize they are not alone, to express their feelings relating to their parents' divorce, and to identify an adult from whom they can seek ongoing help. This group was initially offered at a social service agency but this setting was found to be too isolated from the rest of the child's life. Now the group is held in the school environment which is a more conducive setting for enabling the children to fulfill their needs.

The group is designed to be an enjoyable experience as well as a supportive and educational one. This is achieved through stories, games, role play, drawing activities and discussion. The members learn how to express their feelings in a safe neutral environment, learn coping skills, skills to express themselves to others, and develop ongoing contact with peers in the group as well as with the school professional acting as facilitator.

The designers of the group, social workers in the family life enrichment department of a family service agency, developed a training program for school personnel in the use of the model so that the curriculum can be used in a wide number of school districts. So that each district receives full benefit of the training provided, each workshop member is expected to train at least one other school professional. In this way, the training is passed on so that many children can benefit from any one training session.

This paper will discuss how social workers from the private, non-profit sector can cooperate with school professionals to serve the concerns of the child whose parents are divorcing.

The group's curriculum will be presented and descriptive material from children attending the group as well as comments from workshop participants will illustrate how the curriculum addresses the needs of children of divorce and enables them to function better in school.

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The statistics of divorce in this country are familiar to everyone. Nearly one in two marriages end in divorce each year. 65% of those who divorce have children under 18 so that more than one million children and adolescents are facing divorce in their families each year. 75% of the children born in the 1980's will experience a one parent family for at least five years, due primarily to the divorce of their parents.

These statistics only begin to reflect the devastating impact the marital disruption has on each family member. During the divorce process, both parents and children are bombarded by a wide range of feelings, including isolation, hurt, anger and guilt. It is a time when family members may have difficulty communicating with each other or completing even the simplest task. Relationships with others may become tenuous and demand extraordinary effort to maintain, particularly for people in such a vulnerable state. Due to this,divorce has been called "crazy time" by those who have gone through the process.

Traditionally, divorce has been recognized as a crisis for adults and many services exist to meet their special needs at this time. While its impact on children has been acknowledged, few services have been developed to specifically address youngsters' needs at the time of their parents' divorce. The purpose of this paper is to present a model for group work for professionals (social workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, nurses, and other mental health professionals who are in contact with children primarily in a school setting) to use with children who are experiencing the separation and/or divorce of their parents. Included is

background material on the development of the model, suggestions on organizational planning and recruitment, and examples of the content of the curriculum.

Program Description:

Due to the large numbers of people affected locally by divorce, two of the most popular groups offered by the Family Life Enrichment program at Child & Family Services, Inc., Hartford, Ct. for the past 8 years have been for individuals who are separated and/or are in the process of obtaining a divorce and for parents who want to better understand the effects of divorce on their children and want to learn ways to better deal with these effects. Approximately 650 adults have been served in these two groups. Many of the members who were parents found the groups helpful, and requested that a group be offered for their children. Teachers and social workers reinforced the idea that services were needed for the children they worked with, who were experiencing divorce in their families. To respond to these requests, the authors of this paper collaborated with a child therapist in the agency's child guidance clinic to develop a curriculum, Children of Divorce, for a time-limited structured group for children which focused on the issues of separation and divorce.

The first group was given at the agency for 6 boys ages 9-11, whose mothers had been participants in our divorce groups. While the group experience was described as positive by members, parents and leaders, the one drawback observed was that it was not possible for the boys to continue the relationships established within the group because they lived in different towns. Since ongoing support was intended to be one of the benefits for the

participants, it was obvious that this issue needed to be addressed in any future groups. The most effective way to accomplish this was to offer the groups in school settings where children could continue contact with others they met in similar situations. In addition, in the school-based groups, members would have the opportunity to establish rapport with the school professional who led the group. This would facilitate future contacts between student and leader, who would be available when the student felt the need for some individual support or when the leader noted some area in which the student might need help.

Pilot groups in two elementary schools and one middle school were arranged through the auspices of the social work consultant for the Connecticut Department of Education; the authors co-led groups with school social workers in three different school systems. The original premise that the group members would benefit from having the opportunity to make friends with others in the same situation was borne out by observing the children having interaction with other group members at different times of the day. In addition, the school social workers in several instances were available both to reach out to some who needed it and to help in specific individual situations after the group had ended.

Having received positive feedback from the school social workers, other school personnel, and the children, the next step was to determine how best to make the curriculum available to as many schools as possible, to benefit the greatest number of children. Again, the social work consultant became the intermediary, writing a proposal for the curriculum Children of Divorce to be

used as a model for training school professionals throughout the state. An expectation of those participating in the workshop series was that each person would in turn co-lead the group with someone else in his/her school system so there would be a statewide ripple effect of those trained in the use of the model, dissemination of the curriculum, and ultimately in the number of children served. To date, approximately 140 school social workers, psychologists, guidance counselors, nurses, and other school professionals have participated in the training workshops.

MODEL:

The theoretical framework for this group is based on the model used for the adult Family Life Enrichment workshops. Family Life Enrichment is defined as a supportive group process that combines experiential and didactic learning with mental health concepts of recognizing and utilizing feelings to build and refine life skills. The time and emphasis of the group is divided equally among three focal points, facts, feelings, and experiential exercises, each building on the other in an interrelated fashion.

Children experiencing divorce deal with some of the same issues faced by their parents, as well as other issues unique to them. This model addresses a number of the children's concerns by: recognizing the wide range of feelings experienced by the children, demonstrating the "normalcy" of these feelings for this particular time in their lives, teaching ways to express these feelings, providing support for those who feel isolated and different, recognizing changes in the family structure, and helping members to accept this as reality.

Starting the Group Within a School System

This group is appropriate primarily for children who currently and/or previously have been within a normal developmental range, with good peer relationships, minimal amounts of anxiety, and stable academic functioning, but who may also have episodic feelings of being out of control and may think they are going "crazy" because of the divorce situation. The group is not appropriate for children who have two or more of the following characteristics: an excessive need for individual attention, overly aggressive, difficulty sticking with a task to completion, difficulty following a thought so that thoughts become tangential, or poor reality testing. If the group includes a child who is clearly not appropriate, the other group members may be reinforced in their doubts about their own normalcy.

Another important consideration in the composition of the group is the need to minimize differences of any outstanding characteristic such as race, sex, or age. Such differences only intensify the members' feelings of being atypical.

While groups are often formed by social workers identifying appropriate children from their case loads, recruitment can take other forms: teachers can be requested to provide referrals; or announcements or letters to all parents can publicize the group, often providing referrals from parents who have not previously identified themselves as being divorced or separated. In all referrals, parents must be notified of the group and their permission obtained before their child can be invited to join. Once the leader makes known the availability of the group, there generally is little difficulty in filling it with the recommended maximum

of six children. Rather, as children and parents learn of its existence, there tends to be a waiting list.

Scheduling is one of the key problems in establishing the group, as time is always a limiting factor. The group is designed to run for six sessions of 75 minutes each, but due to the realities of school systems, that time-frame may need to be altered. A number of variations are possible. This group has been given over the lunch hour with extended time granted by teachers, during last period when optional subjects are often scheduled, after school when most children can walk home, at a latch-key after school program, and before school. The curriculum is offered as a model for leaders to use as a guideline, to adapt and to use in whatever time-frame is available. For example, if each session is shortened, the total number might be extended. When the leader has determined a convenient timetable, it should be announced prior to starting the group and the schedule maintained for that series. Doing so provides a consistent structure for the members.

When the idea of groups for children experiencing divorce in their families was first proposed, it met with resistance from some school administrators and parents. Administrators' concerns were that schools should focus on academics, while parents had questions about discussing private family matters in a school setting. This occurred in spite of the fact that school social workers and teachers dealt with these issues daily when children shared their concerns at school. To help deal with these concerns, school staff had frequently requested consultation on this matter. With a curriculum in hand, the potential group leaders were able

to dispel many of the major concerns of administrators and parents. In addition, when the initial groups were designated as a pilot project, the group members' enthusiasm and the teachers' positive feedback did a great deal to insure the success of the program. Teachers observed that children who had been performing poorly in the classroom often showed marked improvement after participating in Children of Divorce where they were able to address some of their personal issues in a safe environment. After three years of offering this program to school personnel on a statewide basis, who, in turn, are offering it in their own school systems, it appears to be widely accepted by everyone concerned.

The development of a trusting relationship between leader and children begins during the recruitment process and continues throughout the period the group meets and afterward. Prior to the start of the group, an important role of the leader is that of introducing potential members to the idea of the group and assessing their appropriateness for the group. Essential to this process are individual interviews which attempt to lower the anxiety that the child may feel about coming to the group. As he/she meets the leader, sees the room where the group will take place, gets some concrete understanding of what will happen in the group and how the group will be run, the child's fantasies begin to dissipate and his/her integration into the group becomes easier. During this brief session (15-20 minutes), the leader can also begin to assess the child's motivation, how much and what he/she wants out of the group for him/herself and how much is pushed by the parent, what the child's interests are, what the child likes

to do, what things will be fun for him/her in the group, how appropriate the child is for the group, and his/her ability to relate to others. Finally, the leader can provide information to the child regarding the length, frequency, dates, and content of group meetings, as well as deal with the child's resistances to coming.

The leader can gain an understanding of how the child feels about the group by asking such questions as: How did you hear about this group? How do you feel about coming to the group? What made you decide to come? What are you hoping to gain? What will you miss out on by coming? During the interview, the leader should note how the child's thoughts relate to each other, whether or not his/her anxiety level goes down as the interview proceeds, and how the child relates to the interviewer.

The role of the leader in the group is one of a facilitator, enabling members to make connections with each other, to express feelings, and to master skills for coping. The leader helps the members recognize that in divorcing families there are many similarities of feelings and experiences, but the leader also acknowledges the uniqueness of each family's situation.

While many leaders prefer to do the group alone, certain advantages accrue from co-leading. Co-leaders can react to and learn from each other, more time can be spent observing and responding to group members, and co-leadership is helpful to someone with no previous group leadership experience. There are also disadvantages: co-leadership may not be practical or possible due to time and staff constraints, the relationships between leader and children may be diluted, styles and personality may not be compli-

mentary, and extra time needs to be allocated for planning. These considerations need to be weighed in determining whether or not to co-lead.

Content

Children of Divorce is designed to be highly visual. When the children enter the meeting room for the initial session, the walls will be bare. As art work is completed, it should be hung on the walls. (A useful technique is to hang paper for drawings on the wall, then have the children use the wall as an easel). Games with visual components are also left on the wall after they have been used in a session. This growing accumulation of visuals fosters group cohesiveness by changing a previously barren room into the group's own room, and fosters a sense of group history by allowing members to view quickly what they have discussed and accomplished over the life of the group. The less movement there is from room to room the better.

Each session involves a variety of activities reflecting the divorce experience of the child's family. While a variety of activities is essential to maintain high interest, the structure of the group should remain consistent. Therefore, the group is designed so that one activity involves something that the child does alone and then shares with other members, and at least one activity is done with the total group.

This assortment of activities includes games, role-playing, drawings, stories, sculpting, writing, and discussion. Each was developed for the curriculum as a specific way to help children cope with the separation/divorce in their families, the feelings

they have about it, the changes it has brought into their lives, and their need to communicate with others about it.

An illustration of how an activity helps children explore their feelings and the changes in their lives is in the use of books and/or movies. When children see their own feelings and experiences in print or on film, their feelings are validated and their experiences are normalized. The difficulty in using these audio-visual aids is that many of them portray idealized situations in which parents are shown always putting the best interests of the child before all else. This is often different from what group members are experiencing. The value of using books and films comes from the fact that similarities and differences between the children's situations and those portrayed fictionally can be used as a focus for discussion. This, in turn, often highlights the many similarities between their own concerns and those of other members, resulting in increased group support and cohesiveness and increased feelings of normalcy.

An example of how communication skills are taught is in the use of an art project in which the group members draw two people they know well, one with whom they can talk comfortably, and one with whom they would like to be able to talk more easily. Children then are encouraged to identify the communication skills used with the first person in order to utilize them in breaking down the communication barriers with the second person.

One technique is used throughout all the sessions to focus on the central issues of separation and loss in the children's lives. This is a calendar, used at the beginning and end of each session to remind the children how many sessions remain. This

emphasizes the aspect of endings which parallels their struggles within their families. Other activities included in this model also enable the children to express feelings, master skills for coping, and make connections with each other while focusing on the issue of divorce in their families.

Adaptations

Although this curriculum was designed principally for groups of children in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, there have been a variety of adaptations for use with different age levels. With younger children there is more of an emphasis on stories, drawings, and games and less on activities requiring reading and writing. For older children verbal activities and audio-visual materials are accentuated. Another adaptation has been to use many of the activities in individual work with children. This has been found to be an effective way of enabling a reticent child to begin discussing concerns and feelings about his/her parents' marital disruption. Parts of the curriculum have also been used with children, either in groups or individually, who are not facing the divorce of parents, but who could benefit from learning the communication skills and how to identify and express feelings.

This model for group work with children affected by divorce achieves its effectiveness for a variety of reasons: it enlists professionals already working with children in a congenial setting; it presents a focused and coherent curriculum; it recognizes the value of emotional concerns and reactions; and it takes cognizance of the realities of group process in starting and running the

groups. The model has the added advantage of flexibility. It can be adapted to a variety of ages, settings, and problem definitions. As one response to the needs of children involved in the divorce process, it provides for the amelioration of negative affects and builds strengths that facilitate coping.